

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – September 21-25, 2009
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While watching/viewing another person sign, you should focus your eyes on the signer's:

- a. hands
- b. chest area
- c. face
- d. lips

Go to the bottom of this message for the answer.

Answer: “c” face. Specifically you should maintain eye contact with the person you are communicating with. Your eye gaze should not look away or follow the hand movements or focus on anything except to maintain eye-contact with the signer. Signers read/understand sign language by seeing the signs performed within the visual field while maintaining eye-contact.

An interesting discovery about the nature of signs is based on this communication behavior. Signs that are formed closer to the visual center of the signing space; that is, signs formed closer to the face will have more distinctive handshapes than signs

formed in the periphery of the signing space, for example in the chest area or just above the waist. Signs formed away from the visual center of the signing space will have more basic handshapes. For example, "SHOES", "WALK", "BOOK" ... These signs use unmarked handshapes like "closed fist", "flat B-hands" etc. Signs that are formed closer to the visual center will have "marked handshapes". A "marked handshape" means that there is more "information being expressed in the handshape" or "the handshape is more complex." Signs performed closer to the visual center of the signing space, "the face", can be seen more easily because of the focus of the eyes to this area.

These rules about how signs are made are called "morpheme constraints." Morpheme constraints for ASL are rules about what combinations of movement, location, handshape and palm orientation are allowed when creating/making signs. All languages have morpheme constraints. A morpheme constraint in English is the rule for making words. All English words require at least one vowel (a,e,i,o,u). There are no English words that are formed with all consonants. Hft is not a word but Hat is a word.

Back to ASL.... So what difference does it make? Let's review....

Signs formed further away from the visual center of focus for receiving/reading signs will have basic, unmarked handshapes. In the 1970s and 80s when the Signing Exact English (SEE) movement was going strong often signs were created based on what they called "sign families". The idea was that you could use the "initial letter of the English word" and the movement, location and palm orientation from a standard traditional sign and form a "new sign" with a specific English word meaning. One "sign family" that was created in SEE signing was the group TRY, ATTEMPT, EFFORT, STRIVE.... Of course the traditional ASL sign for "putting forth effort" uses "s hands" pushing/moving forward at just above the waist. In English words like try, attempt, effort, strive are related to the idea of "putting forth effort."

The creators of SEE used the initial letters of the words to create an "initialized sign family". TRY was to be communicated by using "t handshapes" while making the sign. ATTEMPT was to be communicated by using "a handshapes" while making the sign. EFFORT was to be communicated by using "e handshapes" while making the sign and STRIVE was to be communicated by using "s handshapes" while making the sign. It is interesting that the traditional sign for "putting for effort" within the SEE system now had a very specific English word association. Most of these signs felt uncomfortable to native ASL users. Probably these users

really didn't know why they didn't like these signs. Most of these "invented initialized signs" were rejected by the community of ASL users and are not used in ASL today. (TRY with "t handshapes" seems to one that some signers do use but it is probably because the difference between "t" and "s" is very close and the handshape remains "unmarked" for all practical purposes.)

A probable explanation for why these "initialized English signs" were/are rejected by ASL users is because to see the "marked letters" (t, a, e, s) on the hands while the sign is being made at waist level requires that the signers eyes focus on the marked handshape. These signs violate the ASL morpheme constraint explained above. Fascinating, huh?